



the DeKay's Brown Snake



So you've found a little snake, and you're perplexed. You weren't expecting it in the middle of Philadelphia (or Lancaster, or Pittsburgh...), under a flower pot in your garden, or maybe under a piece of trash in a vacant lot. Is it an escaped pet? Did someone release it in the wrong place? No, odds are you've just found a brown snake, and it lives right where you found it.

Brown snakes, also called Dekay's snakes, are usually some shade of tan with two parallel rows of dark spots down their backs and with each row of spots connected by a thin dark line. Sometimes they sport a broad, lighter stripe in between the rows of spots, and when they get scared they puff up, showing white skin between their scales. Their bellies are cream or pink, and their scales are keeled, with a little ridge down the center of each scale. They stay small, rarely longer than a foot, and are completely harmless to humans.

Slugs and snails had better beware, however. These snakes dine on small, gooey creatures, which makes them nice to have around a garden, even if most people don't know they're there. Brown snakes are very good at staying out of sight, and their subtle brown pattern blends in with dead grass or leaves. They seem to coexist well with humans in urban settings; brown snakes can be found in gardens, city parks, vacant lots, and old cemeteries across the western quarter of the state as well as most of Southeast and Central PA. (They also do well in a variety of more natural settings.)

Winter isn't easy on small snakes, and brown snakes often hibernate together in large groups in holes in the ground, old walls, and cracked foundations. In the spring they spread out to mate and hunt, and in the late summer and fall you may see their tiny newborn babies (three inches long and as thick as a matchstick) hunting for even tinier baby slugs and snails.

For more information on identifying the DeKay's Brown snake visit the PA HERP ID Site at www.paherps.com